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# The Politics of Testing

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## Abstract

This article looks at the changes made to examinations in England over recent decades and asks about the politics behind the changes. It considers how increasingly centralised the assessment regime has become, moving from a system where teachers could have a say in how pupils are assessed to a regime dominated by government approved tests. It considers too how the standards-based tests in England are both political in the abstract and party-political in their content.

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## Keywords

*assessment, standards-based assessment, grammar tests, phonics check*

## Introduction

Sixty years ago James Britton wrote: 'It seems to me that, in principle, there ought not to be any better way of preparing a pupil for examination than good teaching' (Britton 1955, cited in Gibbons 2009, p22). He was writing this partly because the English language paper 'encourage[s] training in certain restricted techniques at the expense of more broadly based language teaching' (*ibid.* p22) and was thus in danger of producing a type of teaching that matched it. His position has been echoed throughout the last sixty years and yet, in some ways, there is an optimism to it now lacking amongst English teaching professionals. When he wrote this piece he was encouraging the exam boards to apply what he was advocating: 'the examining authorities ought to recognise the principle [that of good teaching] and make themselves responsible for providing an examination which as nearly as possible satisfies it' (*ibid.* p.22).

His optimism lay in the belief that he could change the exam boards' minds as to how they assessed pupils in a way that is no longer possible. Now any syllabus that the exam boards pass must conform to both government guidelines and Office of Examination and Qualifications Regulation (Ofqual). Tests such as the early years phonics 'check' are commissioned by the DES itself. And therein lies the difference. Assessing pupil performance used to be an

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educational issue, and now it is not. Politics, even party political politics, has become part of the assessment process. So this article will look at both the most recent tests that have been introduced – namely the phonics screening test for six-year olds, the key stage 2 tests for eleven year-olds and the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) taken at sixteen – and look back at how it used to be done, in order to examine the politics of testing.

### The Past

Britton was writing at a time, shortly after the Second World War, when General Certificate on Education (GCE) Ordinary level (O-level) exams were taken (usually at age 16) by only about a quarter of school leavers. In fact the majority left school at age 15 before they could take an exam at all. This in itself is a kind of political decision. Qualifications were deemed unnecessary for the majority of school leavers as most went on to jobs that did not need them. O-levels were a precursor to Advanced levels (A-Levels), taken at eighteen, which were thought of as an academic qualification. As, it was thought, the majority was not academic, why bother to make them do an academic course?

It was James Britton, and the London Association of English Teachers (LATE), who began to eat away at this apprehension. For them, the O-level exam could be seen as elitist. Writing in 1952, they said:

*The sort of children the examiners had in mind were children who visited pen friends abroad, who were chairman of school dramatic clubs, and who arranged private dances. Was this symptomatic of the examiners' 'sympathy' with children?*

LATE 1952, cited in Gibbons 2009 p.21.

In 1951 LATE formed a sub-committee which began looking at the O-level exam with a view to modifying it. They were working with the London Examination Board, one of a number of assessment organisations (commonly known as 'exam boards') that set and managed school examinations in the regions of England and Wales. Ten years on, in the northwest, the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) went further. In 1965, the then Chairman of the JMB wrote:

*The complicated problems arising from examining English Language have been the concern of the Joint Matriculation Board, among many others, for a long time.*

Wilson in Hewitt and Gordon 1965, p1.

In fact the JMB and the University of Durham, which was also taking part in a trial which led to the development of a 100% coursework GCE O-level, had been interested in what Britton and LATE were doing in London in the 1950s and had asked, for example, for the draft syllabus written by LATE in 1952 (Gibbons 2009). It is worth noting that, in justification of the new alternative GCE O-level syllabus, Wilson (of the JMB) wrote:

*The GCE O-level examination in English language is under bitter criticism as conducive to dull and cramped teaching and to crabbed rote learning and practice. The lively interest which should be aroused by learning to read and write English is killed, so it is asserted, by the need to prepare for writing stereotyped answers*

Wilson 1965, p1.

What is interesting about both these attempts to change the exam syllabi is that, unlike today, it came from the bottom up. In other words teachers complained about the format of the exams and the type of learning that ensued, and the exam boards listened. The changes that the JMB instituted lasted until 1992, almost thirty years, and were radical. Rather than sitting a 'terminal' (end of course) exam, pupils would be allowed to submit 100% course work instead. A similar type of qualification was also introduced in 1965, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which was designed for those pupils who stayed on at school but were unlikely to get a grade C. Some exam boards allowed this to be done by 100% course work as well. This method was known as Mode 3 Assessment, and, although pupils could follow a traditional exam-based course, many schools took this course work option. Eventually the two types of qualification were unified and from 1987 to 1992 all students took the GCSE, about half taking the 100% coursework option.

The difficulty, which remained, was the reliability of the coursework assessment. Few questioned their validity, but as Wilson wrote:

*If the teacher of English is to be free to teach his pupils English as he thinks he should teach them, without regard to traditional examination, how can the examining board, whose testamur at the end of the course is required, be assured that by the end of the course those pupils have benefitted from this untrammelled teaching and learning to an extent which merits an O-level pass in English?*

Ibid., p1.

The language in which he describes course work assessment is telling. It is 'untrammelled'. Pupils are walking a path that is as yet untouched as opposed to the well-worn ways of the examination. Yet there is always the suspicion that they have not completed the work themselves: either someone else has done it for them, or nowadays, they have taken it from the internet. The JMB took an experimental approach to find ways in which this could be counteracted.

They adopted a means of marking that was not very dissimilar to the one James Britton had devised when looking at terminal exams. He had pioneered a way of marking exam papers that involved the 'multiple marking of compositions' in a trial that was carried out with Schools Council and a GCE board. The exam was

traditionally marked using an analytic mark scheme where points were awarded or deducted depending on the answer. So marks could be awarded for the technical accuracy of the essay, for example. Britton found that giving exam papers to multiple markers and asking them to impression mark 'gave a greater reliability and validity than the system of marking of that Board, rigorous though it was' (Britton 1964, p.27). Writing over twenty years later he argued that impression marking was more accurate than the 'very careful analytic marking system' (Britton and Martin 1989, pp2-3).

The JMB did not have a multiple marking scheme of the type devised by Britton, which was, as we have seen, exam-based, but it did ask that all folders had to be marked by the pupil's teacher and by another teacher to discuss the grading and then a grade agreed on by the school. This meant that the work was read at least three times by the school. A sample of the school's work, with the grades attached, was then sent off to a moderator (known as a review panel member), a teacher who was appointed by the board, and another sample was sent off to someone known as an inter-school assessor, who also read the samples blind, without knowing the grade.

The scheme is very similar to the one operated by the former Queensland Studies Authoriyy (QSA) until recently, where 'the system of moderation is based on a close partnership between the QSA and the schools' (Queensland cited in Cumming and Maxwell 2004, p. 95):

*The QSA contributes the design, operation and servicing of the structures that allow the system to operate. It accepts the responsibility for training the people who serve on review panels to review schoolwork programmes and student results. On their part, schools contribute the services of teachers as review panellists, and are responsible for developing and implementing work programs in line with syllabuses, and for assessing students' work against state-wide standards. They collect the student work samples and data necessary for their students to receive Senior Certificates* (ibid. p 95)

Two things are significant about this form of assessment. The first is that it offers a kind of spiral curriculum. Writing about the Australian system, in a way that could have been commenting on the JMB, Maxwell wrote:

*The point about progressive assessment is not that there are several assessments distributed over a period of time but that later assessments allow further improvement on knowledge and skills that were also assessed in earlier assessments.* Maxwell 2004, p3

He added: 'As the student builds up the portfolio of evidence of their performance, earlier assessments may be superseded by later assessments covering the same underlying dimensions of learning' (ibid., p3). In effect, it is an examination that allows for the kind of 'good teaching' (Britton 1955, cited in Gibbons ibid., p22) that Britton was asking for in 1955. The key to this is, as has already been said, that the board and the school work closely together, each one responding to the other.

Although 100% course work was made accessible to all pupils in England in 1987 by a conservative government, it was also a Tory government that got rid of it. In June 1991, the then Prime Minister John Major announced in a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, a right wing think tank, that no more than 20% of GCSE English assessment could henceforth be done through coursework. The number was adjusted slightly and became 40% for language and 30% for literature, but the days of a 100% coursework were gone. Moreover, the days of the boards' [boards'] consulting with schools had also disappeared. Since the introduction of the National Curriculum, in 1989, government had become involved in the business of schooling and this marks the major shift in assessment policy. Governmental involvement in the assessment of pupils meant that teachers could be held to account through examination results.

### **Politicising testing**

Since 1989 both Labour and Conservative governments have used exams to rate a school's success. League tables, whereby schools were to publish their results and be rank ordered, depending on how well they had done, were introduced by the Tories, along with the national curriculum. And it is here that the politicization of the testing process in England really begins. Schools were marketised through the publication of league tables. As part of the national curriculum children had to take standard attainment tasks (SATs), at the ages of 7, 11 and 14. These were based on the work of the Task Group on Assessment Testing (TGAT), chaired by Professor Paul Black. His aim was to give each subject a pathway of progression, through levels 1-8, which would be clear to parent and teacher alike. Every child would know what they had to do to improve, throughout their school career. But this sat ill with the Right. It seemed too fluffy and educational as opposed to the more stringent market forces they were looking for. In 1993, Robert Skidelsky, a right-wing historian, in a speech for the Centre for Policy Studies, commented that the whole thing was 'a fudge between the professional educators' doctrine that testing should diagnose individual strengths and weaknesses and the Government's wish to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching in schools' (Skidelsky 18.10.1993, cited in C. Chitty 2014).

The desires of the Conservative government won out. Despite a two-year boycott of the SATs, initiated by English teachers between 1993 and 1995, they came back. Although both parties, Labour and Conservative, used the league tables in the marketization of schools, the emphasis was slightly different. Under the Tories, the raw figures were used to create a system of haves and have-nots. In the

main they used league tables to create a system of competition between schools. Although this was designed to raise standards in schools, competition driving institutions to improve their results, and so attract pupils, it also created failing schools. As one school gained better results so it attracted more pupils, leaving other schools behind. While it was meant to encourage the parent/consumer to choose a good school, it actually put power in the hands of the successful schools as they had the power to accept or reject pupils who applied (Ball 1993 and 2007). Fred Hirsch, author of *The Social Limits to Growth* (1977), argued that education was the ultimate 'positional good'. This is because the value of any product relies on its relationship to others; while we can all have something good, we cannot all have the best.

When the Labour government came in, in 1997, they continued with the policy of league tables. They too believed in market forces but somewhat paradoxically they believed in *Excellence for All* (DfE, 1997 and DCSF, 2007) as well. No longer could the nation have failing schools: all had to achieve high standards, all would have the best. It is true to say that, under the Labour government, exam results did rise exponentially. With the exams for eleven-year-olds (KS2), for instance, the target was that 80% of all pupils would gain a level 4 in the tests. When the Tories first introduced the SATs, a level 4 was intended as the average for someone of that age. Labour's desire for high standards, then, meant that this was completely reconfigured; and although failing to achieve the target may have been one of the reasons why David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, resigned in 2002, he got very close. For the GCSE exams in English, again, over the period of the Labour government candidates gaining a grade of C or above rose from around 35% to around 60%.

Yet the Labour party's obsession with results meant that schools became more concerned with fulfilling the target than how they were achieving it. To quote Goodhart's Law: 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes' (Goodhart, citing Stobart 2008 p116). Schools became interested in teaching to the test rather than educating their pupils (Mansell 2007). This in turn led to the pressure on pupils to perform. Newspaper articles abounded on how children suffered under the strain of the new testing regime (ibid).

### **PISA and PIRLS: Standards-based testing**

Increasingly, however, the concern over how we were performing in England became part of a wider standards-based debate. Both the Labour and Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) governments became interested in various international indicators such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). These are curious phenomena. They are standardised tests completed by a sample of students either by country or by region. In Canada, which operates a federal system, individual states such as Alberta or Ontario take the

test; some participants are regions as, for instance, Shanghai; others are countries such as England or Finland.

There are many things that could be said about these standards-based tests. 'The model [...] fits the economist's need for simple indicators which can be read to see if investment is paying off' (Stobart 2008, p118). Governments can see if schools are performing up to expectations. But it is clear that there are ways of reading the statistics so that, for example, the samples differ radically from country to country; that if we were to look at a region in England our results would differ vastly from the way they are currently reported; that the influence of immigration in a country can affect the results (Entorf and Minolu 2004). Certainly it has meant that countries across the world have begun to think about how they will emerge from the statistical data. We will return to this in a moment.

In England one of the chief results that arose from the tests was party political wrangling. When the results of the tests, for instance, were positive, as in 2003, when the UK was rated seventh, Labour used it as an opportunity to say how successful their policies were but in 2010, Michael Gove, the then shadow Secretary of State for Education, used the statistics to say that England had dropped from 7th to 25th and blamed the Labour government for this fall in standards. There is some evidence, however, that England's position in international league tables has not substantially altered in the last 60 years. Looking at tables that were produced in the 1960s, England comes out at around the mid -20s even then (Morris 2015). The result in 2003 may have been a blip.

Nonetheless, the pressure on countries to do well is great. Australia, for example, introduced tests in 2008. They announced the National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Pupils in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 had to take a national test in reading, writing and language conventions including spelling, grammar and punctuation as well as numeracy. In the United States, which does not have a national curriculum, 46 of the 50 states, by 2010, had adopted tests under what is known as the Common Core Standards. Moreover, these tests were written by commercial organisations with very little help from the teaching profession (Zacanella and Moore 2014). In England, the Coalition (the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats), and, following them, the Conservative government, has introduced a series of types of tests, particularly for children of 11 and under that, again, will allegedly help results improve.

But there is more to these developments than that. 'Policy makers have realised that assessment can be used as a powerful tool for reform in education. What is tested, especially if it carries important consequences, will determine what is taught and how it is taught' (Stobart 2008, p118). Manufacture a type of test that espouses your values, make it high stakes and teachers will have to teach to that test.



## The present

So what do the Conservatives want from education? It seems that in essence they want to conserve. They want phonics, grammar and the canon, 'the great tradition of our literature' (Gove 2010). When the Labour party wanted some of these too, namely grammar and phonics, they were being, to a certain extent, conservative too. What is significant about the Tories, however, is that they have achieved the changes they wanted not through a national curriculum but through the testing regime. The national curriculum, once thought to produce higher national standards by the Conservative government who introduced it, is no longer compulsory in schools that have become academies or free schools. Since the number of schools that come under that heading is now about 65%, and the White paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE 2016) proposes that all schools should become academies by 2020, clearly this is not the way they hope to achieve change.

In 2012, the government introduced a phonics screening check for six-year-olds. A grammar, punctuation and spelling test was introduced, in 2013, for all 11-year-olds, and in September 2015, 14-year-olds started a two year GCSE either in English language or literature, or both, which will be examined terminally at the end of the course. The literature that they study is predominately pre-20th century. All these tests are said to help us achieve better in PIRLS and PISA but all are to a conservative agenda.

### *Phonics Check*

Let us look first at the phonics check to. In 2011 Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education, announced that the Tories would 'tackle head on the defeatism, the political correctness and the entrenched culture of dumbing down that is at the heart of our educational establishment' (Gove 2011). He was talking in the context of 'wanting to teach children to read properly' (ibid). He claimed that he would 'not rest until we have eliminated illiteracy in modern Britain' adding that, 'The failure to teach millions to read is the greatest of betrayals' (ibid). His talk of 'political correctness' and a 'great betrayal' is not only a swipe at the 'educational establishment' but also at the left in general. They, after all, are the ones who talk of political correctness. So although it may seem that he just wanted to raise standards it is also a party political statement, which has seen its fruition in the phonics tests for six-year-olds.

Children are already assessed on their reading at seven. The phonics test, or check, is additional and mandatory and will, the Conservatives presume, teach them to 'read properly'. As the DfE put it, 'The purpose of the phonics screening check will be to confirm that all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard' (DfE 2012). Children are asked to read a series of words, some of which are regular words and some of which are called 'alien' or non-words that have a phonic clue in them but are not part of the English language. So for example in the government's video on the phonics test they have words like 'yed', 'emp', 'sheb', 'muzz' or 'roopt' (Youtube, consulted

19.05.15). In order to achieve a pass rate a child has to score over thirty correct answers.

The phonics screening check has faced considerable opposition. The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA), for example, wrote a letter in which it claimed that:

*The government is proposing to spend millions of pounds of tax-payers' money every year on a test which will increase workload, undermine teaching time, fail in its core purpose of accurately identifying children's needs in reading and is unnecessary in promoting the already present teaching of phonics.* UKLA, 2012.

Even the All-Party Parliamentary Group showed doubts about the efficacy of a phonics alone approach, 'There was a great concern that 'phonics' and 'reading' were being used interchangeably by policymakers when they were not the same thing at all: reading isolated words is not reading for meaning' (APPG 2011. p14). Nevertheless the phonics test came in and is now in its third year.

Next on the conservative agenda is grammar, particularly the grammar of Standard English. Again Gove in a speech in 2010 said that it was a 'child's right' to 'communicate clearly'. It is evident that he meant in Standard English, although it is perfectly possible to communicate clearly using non-standard forms. He continued: children are 'unable' and 'incapable of writing a clear and accurate letter' (Gove 5 October 2010) and concluded: 'Under this government we will insist that our exams, once more, take proper account of the need to spell, punctuate and write a grammatical sentence' (ibid). Again criticising his Labour predecessors, Gove said that the 'basic building blocks of English were demolished by those who should have been giving our children a solid foundation in learning' (ibid). His message is clear: only this government can be trusted to teach English in the way it should be taught. To ensure this, he changed the tests for eleven-year olds and the amount of credit given in GCSE English for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

## **Key Stage 2 Grammar test**

Introduced at eleven was a grammar test. This is significant in and of itself. It speaks of having the grammatical 'building blocks' in place; that these must be acquired first in a child's development as a writer. Moreover, it is the grammatical terms that are needed, not actual proficiency in writing itself. If we look at a sample of the test for eleven year-olds (KS2) to be taken in 2016 we see what this means (STA 2015). So for example one question reads: 'In the sentence below, what **word class** [sic] is the word *her*? Luckily Alison saw where the squirrel had taken her [sic] purse. Tick one: noun, determiner, adverb, adjective (ibid).' The answer, presumably, is determiner. Ron Carter's website on grammatical terms defines the term thus:

*Determiner: Specifies the kind of reference a noun has. Common determiners are: the, those, my, her, both, all, several, no. We use the term 'zero determiner' to refer to phrases where no determiner is used: eat vegetables'* (Carter 2015).

However, 'her' could be defined as a possessive adjective. Carter writes that 'Possessives show possession and include words like *Jill's, your, theirs. My, your, his, her, their*, etc. are possessive determiners. *Mine, yours, hers, ours*, etc. are possessive pronouns' (ibid). Part of the problem is that the terms we use change over time. The word determiner is relatively recent.

The same is true of the term fronted adverbial:

*How do the words At that moment [sic] function in the sentence below? At that moment [sic], she didn't care if yelling made her look silly: she just wanted her purse back. Tick one: as a noun phrase, as a relative clause, as a fronted adverbial, as a conjunction*

(STA 2015).

'At that moment' functions as a description (or 'modifier') of the verb 'care'; when did she not care? – 'at that moment'. A teacher struggling with these grammatical terms may look to the Internet for help. So for example the *Times Educational* website says that a fronted adverbial is called this because it always occurs at the start of a sentence. It used to be called an adverbial phrase, which differed from an adverbial clause because a clause has to contain a finite verb. Consult the Internet further, however, and you get a varied picture. In fact the first entry on Google about fronted adverbials (Ridgeway School), states below the title 'Fronted adverbials' in bold: 'Adverbial phrases give information on When – time, where – place and how – manner'. The example it gives goes on to conflate adverbial clauses and phrases. So they give the sentence 'Walking down the street, I fell over my shoelace' but highlight the first four words as a 'fronted clause' (ibid) despite the fact they don't include a finite verb. They then have examples for children to complete: 'Underline and define the adverbial phrase in each sentence' and go on to give adverbial clauses: 'Since I got my new glasses, I can see what I am reading (ibid).' A teacher trying to prepare children for the test, who is either older and has a different name for the grammatical term, or indeed someone who is unfamiliar with the grammar itself would have a very confusing time.

Now it may be very interesting to get into debates about the changes in terminology. It might also be good to have a knowledge about language that engages pupils with this kind of information. It may even be pertinent to challenge the Ridgeway School, if there is indeed such a school, on their website. What the test does not do, to quote Gove, is give eleven year-olds the 'basic

building blocks of English' (Gove 2010). What can be said is that the test serves the Conservative desire to have formal grammar teaching because, undoubtedly, in order to pass the test schools will provide decontextualised grammar lessons to prepare children for them. They will be parsing sentences looking for types of clause.

The desire for grammar goes hand in hand with the need for a canon of literature. John Marenbon, writing a paper for the Centre for Policy Studies, stated that the teaching of English should:

*Pursue the simple and well-defined aims of teaching children to write and speak standard English correctly and in initiating their acquaintance with the literary heritage of the language.*

Marenbon 1987, 18

## GCSE

Significantly, back in 1991, Marenbon was put in charge of the tests for fourteen year olds where he included an extract from Johnson's *Rasselas* on a test paper, a piece of writing that may have canonical weight but may not have been appropriate for the fourteen year-olds taking the exam. And it is in the new GCSEs that we see the link between grammar and the literary tradition exemplified. In September 2012 Michael Gove and Nick Clegg, deputy leader of the Coalition, announced in the *Evening Standard* that they were going to change the examination system:

*We need a new set of exams for students at the age of 16 – qualifications which are more rigorous overall and more stretching for the able but which also ensure the overwhelming majority of children can flourish and achieve their full potential*

(Clegg and Gove, 17.09.12).

The introduction of the new English GCSEs, to be taken for the first time in 2017, has gone through a number of phases and finished with one exam in English language, the other in literature. Both are to be assessed by terminal examination. The language paper has 30% of its marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar; the literature exam includes predominantly pre-20th century texts. We will return to these later. First, however, we will look at the changes that were brought in previously, which have altered the way GCSE is considered and have shifted its approach to assessment more towards the right.

The changes began when the Coalition first came into office in 2010. English Language was made a part of the new English Baccalaureate (EBacc) that schools were asked to complete. This was a harking back to the matriculation that was taken in the 1930s and 1940s whereby students had to achieve a pass

in English, maths, science, a language and a humanities subject. For Gove the new EBacc meant the number of GCSEs a pupil had gained in English language, maths, science, a modern language (which only included French, German, Spanish and, oddly, Latin) and a humanities subject (which meant history or geography). English Literature was, at this point, not mentioned as part of the requirement. It became so later because of the fuss that was caused by English teachers who were afraid that for many students English Literature would become a luxury they would not take. The requirement was eventually changed so that either Literature or Language would count. League tables were formed on how well a school had done in the EBacc Baccalaureate rather than by the number of GCSEs they had achieved above a grade C.

What is telling about the introduction of the EBacc is that Gove did not apparently care that he was introducing this part way through the pupils' course. Because their pupils had already chosen their options, and begun their GCSEs, schools suffered when the first round of figures were produced. Part of the reason this was done was to prevent pupils choosing 'vocational' options such as BTecs that carried the weight of four GCSEs. But it was also to cut down on subjects such as drama and media studies, often taught by English teachers. These were deemed softer options by Gove, in line with general conservative discourse, and not sufficiently academic.

The next development was around the modular nature of GCSEs, although it occurred with a protest, spearheaded by individual schools, but supported by many English teachers, on the grading of exams. Much of Gove's desire to get away from the current GCSEs was to beat what is known as grade inflation. This was partly what was behind the dispute over English Language GCSEs in 2012. Ofqual, without, it is said, political interference, asked the awarding bodies to alter their grade boundaries to conform more closely to previous GCSE pass rates. This meant that the pupils who took the exams in the summer fared considerably worse than those who took them in January. GCSE grade boundaries over recent years have been fixed by a combination of criterion-referencing and norm-referencing, in that the examiners propose the grade boundaries based on their own judgement but awarding bodies and Ofqual set upper margins for the increases (or hypothetically decreases) in pass rates from earlier years. In letters leaked from Edexcel and Ofqual, on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 2012, we learned that the awarding body was asked to alter their grade boundaries for a C grade, which meant, according to Edexcel, altering the grade boundary by ten marks from 55 out of 96 to 65 out of 96. In Wales they asked the awarding bodies to relook at the grades awarded and eventually they gave them the higher mark. In England, however, Michael Gove said that it was not his place to intervene as Ofqual is meant to act independently of parliament. Ofqual was taken to court and the court found in their favour, doubtless to the good cheer of Michael Gove.

Gove wanted to tackle the modular nature of GCSE, whereby candidates could take the modules again and again until they achieve the grade they wanted. This is not unlike an MOT approach to exams whereby you pass when you have addressed all those things which were wrong. It also takes a more formative approach to the assessment as each time you learn from your errors and put them right. Gove, however, wanted everybody to take one set of exams in the summer, and this is what he achieved. This again is more in keeping with the old O-level type exam where all the papers were sat together, either in the summer or autumn. The new GCSE 'linear' exams fit into this category.

The final change to take place at GCSE was the abandonment of the oral component at GCSE. This had been a part of the exam since GCSEs were introduced. As part of the English paper, and then as part of English Language, 20% of the final mark was given to speaking and listening. This was dropped in 2013, halfway through the course and with no consultation. An ability to communicate verbally, as opposed to written communication, was seemingly not valued. An Ofqual paper claimed:

*We estimate that removing speaking and listening from the qualification would mean a drop of between 4 and 10 percentage points at GCSE.*

Ofqual 2013.

So what of the new exams? The most significant change is that there is no course work. Under the Labour government, doubt about the reliability of course work had arisen. In the past pupils had been able to complete their coursework at home. This caused huge anxiety in the press for two reasons. The first was that middle-class parents help their offspring with their coursework, and it is feared, do a great deal of it themselves. The other is the Internet – pupils copy work from it. So great was the anxiety that in 2006 the QCA published a document called *Authenticating Coursework* (QCA 2006). The Labour government therefore introduced an assessment procedure called controlled conditions which means that the coursework is not just completed in the classroom but is done like another exam. So anxious were the authorities that no cheating could take place that pupils could only take in very brief notes on what they had done in class to what is in effect a test. The Conservatives have gone one stage further and we have returned to a system which is exam based only. True, at the moment we have the IGCSEs which allow course work but soon these will not count in the league tables.

Then there is the new grading system. It goes from 9-1 and all pupils will be entered for the same exam. There is no tiering of papers into a higher and foundation, as there was with previous GCSEs. It is likely also that the new grading will be harsher. If you add the points that you would have gained for an old GCSE in English language, you would have 1057, the majority being

above a grade C. For A and A\* there are 138, for Bs and Cs there are 766 and for D – U there are 153. In 2017 (the first year of the new GCSEs), however, the total number of points is 938 and the number of B and C grade equivalent is only 679. Presumably this is to make the exams, to quote Gove and Clegg, ‘more rigorous overall’ (Clegg and Gove 2012).

Finally there is the content. As has been said, 30% of marks on the language paper will be for spelling, punctuation and grammar. In addition, all the exam boards, with the exception of Edecxel, will ask pupils to analyse an unseen, pre-20th century non-fiction text. Those completing the Edexcel assessment will analyse an unseen, pre-20th century fiction text. This emphasis on the pre-20th century is seen to an even greater extent in the literature exam, where candidates have to study a Shakespeare play, a 19th century novel and poetry since 1789. They could do a modern British novel as well but are more likely to do a British play and they will look at contemporary poetry too. Although pupils could do a non-British 19th century novel, none of the exam boards has offered one. Gove, in his 2010 speech, announced:

*Need to reform English – the great tradition of our literature – Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy – should be at the heart of school life. Our literature is the best in the world – it is every child’s birthright and we should be proud to teach it in every school.*

Gove, 5 October 2010

In the new GCSEs he has at least made sure that ‘the great tradition of our literature’, as he sees it, is taught; and this he has done, again, through the exams rather than the curriculum.

There are some who see pockets of good in the new system. It could be said that having only terminal exams at 16 frees up the curriculum to teach adventurously from 11–14. Nevertheless, the days of course work are long since gone. The opportunities to teach a curriculum that in some way reflected those who were taking the exam are remote.

## Conclusion

English teachers, often closet optimists, will try as ever to adjust and manipulate the tests that children have to take to get the best out of them (Gibbons 2016). The pressure to teach to the test, however, will be considerable. In a recent survey undertaken by the National Union of Teachers (2016), 90% of the 5000 teachers surveyed said that the standards were ‘inappropriate’ for the pupils, saying they found them ‘too hard and confusing’, adding that it would ‘brand many as failures’ (Adams 26.03.2016). They felt that, as one teacher put it: ‘It is inevitable that teachers will be driven by the hastily concocted interim assessment frameworks and this will create a narrowing of a curriculum which becomes content driven. So much for deeper learning.’ Significantly, also,



teachers felt that the new tests had little to do with educating pupils and much more to do with politics. One respondent wrote of the 'CONSTANT [sic] meddling by ministers who don't have the first clue about primary classrooms' (NUT 2016). Under the new system of assessment, the scores that a pupil gets at age eleven will start as the baseline for their assessment at GCSE. This new accountability measure, known as Progress 8, will mean that a pupil's progress over their secondary school experience will be marked by the difference in their achievements between eleven, in the grammar tests, and sixteen when they take their GCSEs. A pupil's progress, and by default their English teacher, then, will be constantly under scrutiny. The closet optimists will, inevitably, continue to press for changes to the examination system and pursue 'good teaching' despite 'certain restricted techniques' proffered by the new exams (Britton 1951, cited Gibbons 2009, p.22). Of course, there will be schools which insist that pupils practise analysis of countless numbers of unseen, pre-20th century non-fiction passages; and spelling, punctuation and grammar will abound. We live in a world, be it dominated by PISA or PIRLS, or governed by a conservative hegemony, where the tests we do are bound up with politics.

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